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SUBJECT: ROK POLITICAL COUNSELOR UPDATE ON NORTH KOREAN
REFUGEES

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR SUSAN SUTTON, REASONS, 1.4 (B,D).

¶1. (C) Summary. ROK Embassy Political Counselor Choi said on November 15 that differences within the RTG may account for the recent raid on the South Korean shelter for North Korean refugees. After discussions with the RTG, the ROK Embassy is now working with Thai Immigration to set up a new shelter that will be co-supervised by the South Koreans and Thai Immigration. Choi noted that RTG policy on the legal aspects of and exit permits for refugee cases was in flux and this was affecting the departures of North Korean refugees. The ROK expects an increase in North Korean refugees coming to Thailand next year. Choi also commented on the results of his recent visit to Chiang Rai in northern Thailand, North Korean refugee NGO representative Kim Won Du, and expansion of the Bangkok Immigration Detention Center to accommodate the increase in North Korean refugees. End summary.

¶2. (C) ROK Embassy Political Counselor Young-Sam Choi called on Political Counselor on November 15 and provided an update on North Korean refugee issues. After the August raid by Thai immigration officials on the shelter housing North Korean refugees bound for the ROK, Choi said that the RTG had unofficially advised the ROK Embassy to set up a new shelter in the Bangkok suburbs. The ROK Embassy was surprised when the new shelter was also raided shortly after it was opened. Choi explained this development by noting that the RTG was composed of a number of different agencies. These agencies did not always act in concert and there were even different views within the organizations themselves.

¶3. (C) Choi noted that Thai policy on the legal aspects of and exit permits for refugee cases, except for refugees from the neighboring countries of Burma, Laos, and Cambodia, were in flux. Thai Immigration had previously not required that refugees about to depart for third-country resettlement go through legal procedures that resolved their status in Thailand. Though many refugees enter Thailand illegally, if they had not been detained by Thai authorities they have not had to go to court, pay a fine or serve jail time before departing for resettlement. Recently, Thai Immigration seemed to change the policy, though it apparently did so without consulting with other RTG agencies. Choi related that UNHCR Regional Representative Hasim Utkan had discussed the apparent shift in Thai policy with the head of Thai Immigration and urged a return to previous practice. Thai Immigration had yet to respond formally. Choi said that those North Koreans picked up by Thai authorities in the first shelter raid had been required to serve jail time. Those picked up in the second raid had gone to court but been given a suspended sentence.

¶4. (C) Choi said that his Embassy seemed to be making progress with the RTG on the shelter issue. The ROK

Ambassador had told the Thai Immigration chief that a South Korean shelter would relieve the overcrowding pressure in Immigration detention facilities. If South Korean shelters were continually raided, there was no purpose in establishing them. In response, the Thai Immigration chief had suggested that the South Koreans and Immigration officials co-supervise a new shelter. A Thai Immigration official had been designated to work with the South Koreans and they were now jointly looking for a new shelter location.

¶5. (C) Choi said he expected an increase in the number of North Korean refugees coming to Thailand next year. During winter, it is easier to cross into China from the DPRK as the Yalu River freezes. Thailand was also now seen as a safe place for North Korean refugees. International community sanctions would likely worsen economic conditions in the DPRK. This would also contribute to a larger outflow from the DPRK.

¶6. (C) Choi said he had visited the northern Thai border town of Chiang Rai the previous week and met with local Thai Immigration officials. Contrary to press reports, no additional measures had been taken at the local level by Thai Immigration to tighten up the border against refugees. The local officials told Choi that if the North Koreans were on Thai soil, they had no choice but to send them to Bangkok for eventual third country resettlement.

¶7. (C) Choi raised the issue of Mr. Kim Won Du, a South Korean who is associated with the North Korean Abduction Solidarity and Citizen Coalition for Human Rights organizations. Choi noted the concerns about improper relationships between Mr. Kim and female North Korean refugees. Choi said that Mr. Kim has a criminal background

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and two charges were now pending against him in ROK courts. Choi said something may happen to Mr. Kim soon and noted that the ROK and Thailand have an extradition treaty.

¶8. (C) In response to a question from RefCoord, Choi said that a mid-level Thai immigration official had asked the ROK Embassy four months ago to support financially an enlargement of the Bangkok Immigration Detention Center where many North Korean refugees are held. However, the Thai had never made a formal request in writing and the ROK Embassy had learned from a more senior Immigration official that RTG regulations do not permit foreign government funding of Thai government building construction.
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